

**Marquette University**  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

---

3-1-2004

# Reframing the Fields

Robert Masson

*Marquette University*, [robert.masson@marquette.edu](mailto:robert.masson@marquette.edu)

---

Accepted version. *Reframing the Fields*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 2004): 49-62. [DOI](#). © 2004 Wiley.  
Used with permission.

# Reframing the Fields

Robert Masson

*Department of Theology, Marquette University  
Milwaukee, WI*

**Abstract.** The conception of metaphoric process elaborated by Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell illuminates a key mechanism often involved in the most significant advances in science and religion. Attention to this conceptual device provides a productive way to reframe the relationships and dialogues between the fields. The theory has compelling implications for reframing the understanding of theology and its task.

**Keywords:** analogy; bidisciplinary dialogue; fundamental theology; metaphor; metaphoric process; religion and science; religious epistemology; theology of disclosure.

Bidisciplinary dialogue between Mary Gerhart (religious studies) and Allan Russell (physics) has involved them in reflection on the creation of understanding in science and religion that has resulted in an explanatory scheme that is remarkable on a number of counts (1984; 2001). I focus here on three contributions that I believe have the most significance from the perspective of religious studies and theology.

## Reframing Fields of Meanings

Their chief contribution is the explanatory scheme itself, which Gerhart and Russell call "metaphoric process" (1984). It is important to stress that their concern is to explain a key epistemic mechanism often

involved in extraordinary advances in science and religion. They are not proposing a comprehensive theory of metaphor, although metaphors often are indicators of the process they seek to illuminate. It also is important to keep in mind that they are not proposing a comprehensive theory of discovery. Their focus is on this one specific mechanism and its implications.

To situate this process in a broader epistemological context, they envision our inquiries about the world and ourselves taking place in "cognitive spaces" or "worlds of meanings." These worlds of meanings are made up of networks of interrelated concepts, or "fields of meanings." The sciences, religion, and the common sense of an epoch or culture are examples. The concepts within these fields do not stand directly for things themselves but for our notions of these things. The notions are defined by their interrelation with other notions. For example, to get some conception of *house*, one must have other notions available (lumber, bricks, wall, window, roof). These other notions are variable, as are the relations between them: not all houses are wood or brick and have four walls. So meaning as a social, cultural, and historical artifact "arises out of the interaction of concepts and relations, and is expressed in the topography of the field" (Gerhart and Russell 2001, 12). It follows that meanings (of *house*, *atom*, *soul*, *body*, *spirit*, and so on) can vary significantly over time or in different cultural and social contexts. Our worlds of meanings are made up of collections of these fields of meanings. These constitute our idea of the way things are. Although these fields of meanings are culturally and historically conditioned, Gerhart and Russell regard an individual's or community's construal, when it is successful, as genuinely corresponding to reality in this indirect and relative way.

Their theory proposes to explain how fundamentally new understandings and meanings develop among those who share such worlds of meanings. They distinguish between such uncommon innovations, or "tectonic reformations," in fields of meanings and either the more routine acquisition of data or the extension of concepts that increase what we know in a field without essentially altering our worlds of meanings. The great majority of advances in science and religious studies involve these more ordinary increases in knowledge. Such, for example, is the gain in astronomy effected by the sighting of a new

planet or a black hole. The increase of knowledge in such cases is through an accumulative process. Such discoveries have significance for astronomy but do not alter the field as such. The imaginative extension of concepts that led to the hypothesis of black holes in the first place is different. That kind of advance is achieved when analogies are made between some thing or datum that is known (or known better in one respect or another) and another phenomenon known less well. As a result, the second phenomenon is better understood. Such analogical processes add new meanings to a field and may have considerable impact on it but still do not transform the field as such. In contrast, Copernicus's insistence that the sun is the center of the universe, or Newton's insistence that the mechanical laws of the heavens are identical with the earth's, created unexpected understandings that changed fundamental notions within physics—and indeed changed how we understand the world.

Gerhart and Russell observe that the key mechanism for transformations such as these is the forcing of an analogy between two meanings that, given the understandings of the day, is unwarranted. In Copernicus's case, for example, the affirmation that the sun is the center conflicted with the standard account at the time that the earth is the center. To affirm that the laws of heaven and the laws of the earth are the same, as Newton did, also entailed forcing an affirmation that contradicted meanings taken for granted in contemporaneous science. But the effect of these forced affirmations, despite their apparent unreasonableness, was to open up possibilities for understanding that had not been available before.

What most distinguishes such uncalled-for analogies is the disruptive effect on the fields of meaning associated with them. The force of the analogies does not simply add new information to the world of physics and astronomy, expanding knowledge the way the discovery of a new planet or a new mechanical law might. Nor does it clarify the given world of meanings, the way affirming an apt analogy between something known and something unknown might. In Newton's day, for example, Galileo's understanding of the heavens and Kepler's understanding of mechanics were already known. The uncalled-for analogies had a more tectonic effect because they forced a reframing in the until-then accepted fields of meanings. The result was reconfigured

fields of meanings that constituted a better understanding of reality. In that sense, the result was a new world of meanings. Moreover, such shifts in fields of meanings typically make available a new logic and understanding of what is reasonable. Conceptual moves are possible in Einstein's world that were inconceivable in Newton's, and moves in Newton's world would not have made sense in Galileo's. Each metaphoric act has the potential to lay the groundwork for otherwise unthinkable later moves.

This reframing of the fields of meanings is the fundamental characteristic of the process Gerhart and Russell call *metaphoric*. That is what distinguishes it from the rhetorical moves we more commonly label *analogy* or *metaphor*, neither of which reconfigures fields of meanings themselves or logical relations between them. To keep that difference in mind, Gerhart and Russell distinguish between the metaphoric, on the one hand, and metaphors and the metaphorical, on the other. On their accounting, most metaphors are not metaphoric because they do not create the possibility for new meaning this way by disrupting the fields of meanings.

The first three essays in *New Maps for Old* (Gerhart and Russell 2001) provide an array of brief illustrations from science and religion. The authors have analyzed several more extended illustrations: in that book, the Bible's identification of Yahweh (God of Exodus) with El (God of the Fathers), and in *Metaphoric Process* (1984), the special theory of relativity and the religious notion of life after death. Although it is not one of their examples, the affirmation that "Jesus is the Messiah" is another paradigmatic instance of the metaphoric process. Given the images current in the eschatology of the day, affirming that God was victorious in the crucified son of a carpenter from Nazareth was uncalled for. In fact, most of the key eschatological images by which Jesus is identified in the biblical Gospels have something of this metaphoric dimension. By ordinary logic he was not a victorious king of Israel; he was not a "Son of Man" who descended gloriously from the heavens; he was not acknowledged by his people and did not vanquish their enemies. To affirm that Jesus is the Messiah is to force an analogy between him and Israel's expressions of hope and trust in God. This requires a different understanding of God, Israel's hope, and Jesus. Affirming that Jesus is the Messiah forces a thoroughgoing revision of

the field of meanings operative in Palestinian Judaism or at least those operative in the narrative worlds of the New Testament. It reframes the meaning of *messiah*, the identity of Jesus, and the field of meanings associated with messianic hope. This makes possible logical moves that are otherwise unavailable and lays the groundwork for later moves otherwise unthinkable.

Six entailments of such metaphoric moves are noteworthy. First, such acts are epistemological in nature. They are not simply rhetorical tropes but rather are reconfigurations of the fields of meanings by which the world is apprehended.

Second, metaphoric affirmations make real, though logically and semantically altered, assertions. Despite their apparent unreasonableness, forcing such analogies does not result in nonsense. To the contrary, twisting accustomed meanings in these situations opens up possibilities for understanding that otherwise would not be available. On this reading, for example, Christians do intend to force the identity between "Jesus" and "Messiah." The logic of this move loses its force if Jesus is not in some sense properly and literally the one expected. I use *literal* here advisedly. The conception of metaphoric process destabilizes the meaning of *literal* itself and warrants this qualified use. Although reference to the literal meaning often assumes that exact and primary meanings are univocal and constant and that fields of meanings are stable, the metaphoric process presupposes that meanings are dynamic and relative. In a metaphoric affirmation words come to have new exact and primary meanings. Moreover, in the reframed context, these meanings are semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case—three further important denotations of *literal*. After Thompson and Joule, heat *is* motion. After Einstein, it is literally true that the speed of light *is* the same for all observers. For those whose world of meanings has been transformed by the gospel, Jesus *is* the Messiah.

Third, notions have such metaphoric thrust only to the extent that they continue to force disruptions in our fields of meanings. If, as is often the case in science, a metaphoric assertion is so effective that it produces a permanent change in meanings, the metaphoric dimension, as we say, dies. "The efficacy that kills the metaphors of science does

not prevail with respect to many metaphors of religion precisely because of our inability to see the world as religion says it is. We fail to understand, and so the metaphor lives on" (Gerhart and Russell 2001, 29).

Fourth, reception is a crucial element in metaphoric acts. The new meanings and logical entailments are available only to those who are able and willing to accept the reframed field of meanings. Some will not. For example, a historian who misses the metaphoric thrust of the affirmation that Jesus is Messiah might legitimately conclude that the claim is an analogical assertion—in some ways justified, in other ways not. A biblical fundamentalist would likely disagree with the conclusion but share the assumption of a nonmetaphoric reading. Both would miss what I am suggesting is the affirmation's logical significance. Misunderstanding is possible because the same assertion can be coherently interpreted as metaphoric, analogical, or univocally literal, and the parties might be quite unaware of their different interpretive assumptions.

Hence, a fifth important entailment of Gerhart and Russell's explanatory scheme: Metaphoric acts are not necessarily self-conscious and frequently are unnoticed. We need not suppose that Copernicus was aware that he was acting metaphorically or that most believers are conscious of the metaphoric thrust of many of their central convictions.

Moreover, recognizing a move as metaphoric does not establish its truth. For example, there is nothing in principle that precludes a non-Christian or a fundamentalist Christian from understanding what is entailed in the attribution of a metaphoric dimension to the affirmation "Jesus is Messiah." But understanding the proposed explanation that the fields of meanings have been reframed does not necessarily entail being persuaded either that the identity claim in the New Testament is in fact metaphoric or, if it is, that the proposed alterations in fields of meanings truthfully illuminate the phenomenon in question. So a sixth implication is that demonstrating that an act is metaphoric does not prove it true.

Gerhart and Russell suggest that two broad criteria are relevant to this issue of truth. The first is productivity or efficacy. A productive

metaphoric act is one that results in images that are useful and effective. The distortions created by reframing the fields of meanings open us to new ways of imagining and describing reality. They also speak of this criterion as the "test of increased intelligibility," that is, a test of whether the changes in the fields of meanings increase intelligibility of the world—not only for ourselves but also for others (1984, 167). Their second criterion is "onto- logical flash," which they describe as "a surprising experience that creates conviction (sometimes a conviction that might be said to 'go beyond all reason')" (2001, 40). For example, Copernicus made his assertion with "no definite observational evidence whatsoever" to support it (2001, 24).

The claim that Jesus is Messiah indicates both the relevance of these general criteria and their limitation. There can be little doubt that this reconfiguring of the fields of meanings was a particularly effective way for early Christians to articulate convictions entailed in their cultic celebrations of Jesus' significance. Moreover, this metaphoric act constituted tenacious convictions that were at the same time counterfactual. But it is conceivable that this productive and inspired conceptual move was nevertheless mistaken. The criteria for making such judgments involve fragile and tentative interpretive implications—much more so in religion than in the natural sciences. Gerhart and Russell of course acknowledge this. It is an issue that will bedevil any analysis that engages questions about our fundamental convictions, in part because any proposal will presume prior convictions about how one assesses convictions. So, to analyze this dimension, one must move beyond Gerhart and Russell's formal explanatory hypothesis to engage particular philosophical and theological construals. Noting this limit does not undermine the explanatory power of their theory. Still, questions about assessing the truth of metaphoric acts at a formal level need further attention. An analysis of religious convictions elaborated by James McClendon and James Smith, another bidisciplinary team (Baptist theologian/atheist philosopher), may prove helpful with this.

## **Reframing Dialogue**

Gerhart and Russell take the metaphoric process and its reconfiguration of fields of meanings as the key to understanding the most significant similarities between science and religion. Doing so effectively reframes the relationships between the disciplines, for then the



focus of dialogue is pushed beyond the respective conclusions, analyses, and data to a more fundamental interrogation of what is going on with the prior, deeper, defining fields of meanings in which they are situated.

In speaking here of religion (or theology) as a discipline, Gerhart and Russell understand it broadly as "philosophical reflection upon explicitly or implicitly religious experience and language" (2001, 158–59). They concur with those who hold that "religion," in this sense, "and science are not only compatible but cooperative and complementary fields of intellectual endeavor" (1984, xv). As we have seen, however, for them the congruity is rooted in the disciplines' common epistemological structures. Both science and theology exhibit metaphoric advances that create new worlds of meaning. Hence, both also exhibit the drive of human understanding to push beyond its limits toward a horizon that continues to recede (1984, 188). Science and theology both respond and witness to such "limit experiences," but they do so in different ways. For the most part, the response within the "rigidly circumscribed" range of scientific considerations is not explicit (2001, 29). A rare example of scientific theory giving theoretical status to such limit experiences is Gödel's Theorem which "states that there is no way to prove that any given mathematical system is closed" (Gerhart and Russell 1984, 176). Theology, however, has theoretical resources for exploring experiences of limit and transcendence. Such conceptions are developed from its analysis of "meanings" rooted in our lived and reflective experience as conscious beings situated in particular historical, cultural, and religious contexts. Because the need for empirical evidence derived from experiment and observation generally precludes, or seriously circumscribes, investigation of such resources, scientific inquiry needs to be complemented by theology. But theology, in attending to its realm, necessarily foregoes the probable and predictive meanings established through empirical observation in the sciences. "In making its turn toward the human and away from measures of the world, theology turns away also from this time and space independence of scientific understandings" (Gerhart and Russell 2001, 160). Hence, theology needs science with "its ability to give a theoretical status to our determinate understanding of specifiable data" (1984, 167).

While Gerhart and Russell affirm the complementarity of science and theology, they are more reserved in their judgments about what the disciplines can directly learn from one another and about the direct

impact on one another. This is clearly, in part, a lesson drawn from their own experience in bidisciplinary dialogue. Particular meanings in their respective fields are often far more subtle than even a well-informed outsider understands. Practitioners in a discipline have a more comprehensive and empathetic grasp of how its fields of meanings fit together and so have a kind of connatural knowledge that enables them to recognize when a specific application of a notion makes sense and when it does not, or when a metaphoric move increases intelligibility and when it is just silly. (See Gerhart and Russell 2003 for their discussion of empathy in scientific and religious understanding.) But this perspective is not just a result of their personal experience in bidisciplinary dialogue. The focus on fields of meanings required by attention to the metaphoric process reframes the focus of dialogue between disciplines.

In that light, they suggest that the natural sciences are more likely to affect religion by reforming the world of meanings within which theology explores the limits of human understanding than by presenting some particular finding that causes change in religious doctrines or narratives (2001, 155–66). The relationship parallels that between pure mathematics and physics. Pure mathematics does not tell anything about the real world. This is what its purchase of axiomatic certainty costs. As a result, advances in pure mathematics do not necessarily have direct implications for physics. “Most likely, depending on the branch of mathematics involved, there are no implications at all” (2001, 158).

But that does not mean mathematics has no significant relevance:

The physicist sees new mathematics as a region in which to prospect just as Einstein did when he needed an analytic geometric structure for his general theory of relativity. He found and made use of Riemann’s geometry, a development in fundamental mathematics made fifty years earlier. . . . A more general statement might be that new mathematics expands the realm of the computable or otherwise analyzable relations and that some of these relations may, at some time, turn out to be of value to physics.” (2001, 158)

Gerhart and Russell suggest that, just as pure mathematics provides this world of meanings having to do with the computable and

analyzable in which physicists can prospect, the natural sciences shape our understandings of empirical reality, particularly of what is believable, and thus provide theology with worlds of meanings within which to prospect. Increases in our believable world of meanings have a significant but indirect impact on theology's fields of meanings. Science over the last five hundred years has vastly enlarged the scope of what is believable, and rather than reduce the scope for theology, understood in this way, science in fact increases it. Reframed dialogue, therefore, does not involve point-to-point mapping between disciplines. Theologians should "not feel constrained to make particular doctrines compatible with particular scientific theories" (2001, 174). It is their expectation that breakthroughs in the natural sciences will cause changes in what it is possible to believe, in the same way that breakthroughs in mathematics have caused changes in what is analyzable.

## Reframing Theology

In Gerhart and Russell's own estimation, the chief contribution of their bidisciplinary dialogue for religious studies has been

to provide a conceptual tool to support the expectation and existence of novelty in theological as well as scientific traditions. . . . When people change, what can be affirmed changes. When people are no longer willing to say "yes, I can believe that," their failure of faith has less to do with natural science than with their own experiences in the world. The need to understand both these experiences and those of natural science makes it possible and necessary to do new theology today. (2001, 60)

Thus, the reframing of fields of meanings and of dialogue leads to a reframing of theology and its task. This strikes me, as a theologian, as the most compelling implication of their explanatory scheme—although it is more implied in their work than spelled out. To the extent that theological "meanings" are metaphoric, theological investigation must be attentive to the interpretive effects of this process.

The degree to which theological meanings are in fact metaphoric, however, is itself a substantive theological issue. If it is granted that at least some theological meanings are metaphoric, pressing questions arise about which are metaphoric. Given the inescapable pluralism of our situation today and the apparent conflicts among the multiplicity of convictional traditions and within them, there is no way to avoid

further questions about how and whether metaphoric acts taken as true by one group might be confirmed more generally as true by others.

Moreover, Gerhart and Russell presuppose that the concern of religion and theology is ultimately with reality at the limits of our experience. The thesis, however, is itself a controverted philosophical and theological stance that requires confirmation. So too is their claim that the metaphoric process is a powerful tool for showing how and that this is the case. Although there are some formal epistemological grounds for Gerhart and Russell's explanatory scheme, I take it largely as an a posteriori hypothesis. Does metaphoric process in fact explain better than other available theories key aspects of religious convictions and theological understandings? The importance of their illustrations is the a posteriori confirmation that these provide for the theory's explanatory power. But this evidence, while suggestive, is limited to brief sketches. Can close and detailed analysis show that metaphoric process helps resolve significant theological controversies? that it explains the conceptual moves of specific theologians? that it significantly clarifies conceptual moves in a number of different traditions? that it can facilitate more productive dialogue across confessional and convictional lines? These questions effectively pose a new research agenda. Can more extensive analysis sustain the notion of metaphoric process as an explanatory scheme?

These questions also suggest a reframing of theology's task. If religious meanings are metaphoric, understanding them requires that this dimension be explicitly disclosed. First, theology must recognize the consequent twisting of the associated fields of meanings. Second, it must understand how exactly the fields of meanings have been reframed. Third, it must comprehend the logical and conceptual implications of this reconfiguration. Finally, it must investigate the warrants for this new understanding. Such a theology of disclosure would seek to clarify in this way the relationship between what is believed and what is believable. It would do so by paying more attention to how religious meanings are used (what is done with the meanings and by the meanings) and how these meanings are related to the larger world of meanings before moving to discussions of the meanings themselves in scriptural, historical, and systematic investigations. This sort of theology of disclosure would offer an

alternative prolegomenon to the standard appeals to fundamental theology, natural theology, or apologetics. Gerhart and Russell do not make this proposal themselves, but I believe that their notion of metaphoric process implicitly calls for such a reframing of theology's first task.

This conception is not unprecedented. Robert Sokolowski (1982; 1994) has made a substantial case for the unique logical status of the Christian conception of God as creator. Although he does not refer to Gerhart and Russell's theory or develop a notion comparable to it, his illuminating exploration of the logical implications of what he calls the Christian distinction implicitly illustrates a key example of the metaphoric process operative in a Christian context. He describes his work as a "theology of disclosure," and it does exemplify a number of the features, though not all, that I have in mind in using the characterization. To some extent, then, his work can be seen as a more detailed and comprehensive confirmation of Gerhart and Russell's theory in one religious context. As such, it also is an example of the reframing of theology which I believe their theory suggests.

My own recent investigations (Masson 2001; 2003) provide some de- tailed analysis to sustain the case for reframing theology along these lines. An example is the controversy between Joseph Bracken (1996; 1999) and Elizabeth Johnson (1996; 1999) over the doctrine of providence, which had been debated in *Theological Studies* and subsequently at meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Catholic Theological Society of America. Gerhart and Russell responded to the discussion (2001, 167–76) in part by questioning Bracken's and Johnson's appeals to scientific notions. This occasioned some of their observations reported above. Although they argue that theologians should be free to prospect among scientific notions, as we have seen, they also warn that there is not—and theologians need not feel constrained to prove—a one-to-one mapping of scientific findings and theological doctrines. There are limits and dangers to prospecting in foreign territory.

Mining one's own territory—in this case, theology's—also has its dangers, however. The notion of metaphoric process can be helpful in alerting us to these risks. The Johnson and Bracken discussion, for example, was for the most part framed as a question about which of

two metaphysics (Process or an updated Thomism) offers better analogies for conceiving God and divine providence. But a close reading of the debate reveals that Johnson, along with a number of contemporary theologians inspired by Aquinas, is also making a fundamental, but by and large implicit, metaphoric move. Framing the question as a debate about whose analogical paradigm is more apt does not excavate the core issue. Johnson seeks to avoid this difficulty in the original article and in her responses to Bracken by explaining how the analogous character of language about God warrants her position. Her appeal to the Thomistic doctrine of the analogy of being, however, serves only to reinforce Bracken's conviction that the crucial issue is about the choice of metaphysical paradigms. Should we think of the fundamental reality as "being" or as "becoming," as substance or as process? If Johnson is committed to Thomism, Bracken does not see how she can avoid the pitfalls of a metaphysics that conceives reality in terms of substance, even if the highest instantiation of reality, God, is conceived as being-as-such and as immaterial.

Close analysis discloses that a much more fundamental dispute is at issue, about how we know and speak of God in the first place and about the way analogies for God apply at all. Such analysis reveals that Bracken presumes a somewhat standard account of analogy as the identification of realities (or meanings) which have some things in common as well as fundamental differences. There has to be something in common between creator and creature, Bracken reasons, or else the analogy turns out to be an equivocation. He detects such equivocation in Johnson's assertion that it is a frequent misunderstanding of the analogy to think of God and creatures as "uncreated and created instantiations of 'being' which is held in common by both" (Johnson 1996, 11). Bracken does not see how this explanation can avoid equivocation. Thomists claim that God's essence is *esse*, "to be." This entails one of two possibilities. Either God is the primary instantiation of being—unique perhaps as the only entity that possesses being by nature but nevertheless the highest exemplification of being that other realities have in lesser degree—or else the meaning of *being* is completely different when applied to creator and creature. If the latter is the case, it would mean that we can say nothing informative about God. If the former is the case, and if being is conceived with the analogy of substance in mind, then, because of the static and impersonal character of the analogue, all kinds of mental gymnastics



and equivocation are required to account for genuine change and freedom in the creator and the creature. Hence, Bracken concludes, conceiving the basic reality as process (or becoming), even if this seems counterintuitive at first, offers a more fruitful analogy for conceiving God and accounting for divine providence and human freedom.

The difficulty with this standard account of analogy is that it misses the metaphoric thrust of both Johnson's argument and the positions of contemporary Thomists such as David Burrell (1979), William Hill (1971), and Karl Rahner (1966; 1978), to whom she and even Bracken himself appeal. This metaphoric dimension of their understanding explains why in their reckoning there are no direct analogies of the sort Bracken imagines between creature and creator. The only way to speak of God is by stretching language to the limits. The forced analogies that result from such metaphoric thinking do not grasp the reality of God but by a twist of thought reflexively and indirectly signify what is meant. The point is not to find apt analogies for God but to find a different way of thinking and signifying, to find a way of employing our analogies to signify what cannot be described—to attend to a reality that is in principle beyond grasp. To achieve this end, analogies are "forced" in the way Gerhart and Russell described, and as a consequence our normal fields of meaning are reframed and a new logic and understanding of what is reasonable becomes possible. The standard account of analogy, however, does not adequately advert to this shift in fields of meanings. To detect this, it is necessary to pay attention to such theologians' *use* of analogy rather than to what they say about analogy. That is the aim of a theology of disclosure, as I understand it: to lay out how such metaphoric analogies stretch our language, reframe our fields of meanings, and consequently make available conceptual moves that are otherwise unthinkable.

Take, for example, Aquinas's assertion "God is simple." Burrell argues that this does not describe a feature or characteristic of God that we can directly grasp or comprehend. It does not enable us to fit God into the categories used to speak of every other reality. It does not intuit some quality in God (simplicity) based on an analogy with that same quality to a lesser degree in ourselves. Rather, when Aquinas treats the simplicity of God, Burrell sees him asking whether God can be located semantically the way other realities can. Is God a body? Is God composed of matter and form, of substance and accidents? Is there

any way in which God is composite or enters into compositeness with other things? Burrell traces how "Aquinas monitors each possible way to get hold of something: locating an object in space and time or saying anything about it." The upshot, Burrell claims, is that "God escapes our grasp on every count" (Burrell 1979, 18– 19). In the case of every other reality, whether physical, mental, real, or imaginary, one can locate the thing and speak about it as a composite of matter and form, accidents and substance, potency and act, genus and species, or form and *esse*. The point of Aquinas's discussion is to show that God transcends this sort of description. If God is the sort of reality Christians believe God to be, the beginning and end of all things, then logically and grammatically God does not fit into any of these categories. But because such categories are the only tools available in our language and grammar for talking about realities, God included, asserting God's reality requires purposefully breaking the rules in a way that indirectly displays what cannot be directly described. Hence, Burrell urges us to watch Aquinas's linguistic "performance," that is to say, how he uses language and how language works, when he affirms "God is simple." Even though the term *simplicity* is substantive and thus sounds like a quality or description of God, Aquinas uses the term as shorthand for denying that any substantives, at least as we know them, can apply to God without the significant qualification just made. If God is the beginning and end of all things, God cannot be like other things, and the grammar we use to speak of God cannot operate the way that it operates when we talk about such entities.

When theologians such as Burrell, Rahner, or Johnson appeal to the "analogy" that Aquinas forced between *God* and *to be*, they are excavating the bedrock of that grammatical difference. Burrell attempts to clarify this unusual analogical move by analyzing the logical difference between the act of predicating and the act of asserting. Asserting that God is simple (saying that God is simple because God cannot be grasped in terms of the composites that enable us to grasp other beings) is different than predicating to God some known composite (such as the simplicity we experience in other realities). The metaphoric act, here, consists in insisting that asserting provides the grammatical analogue for explaining propositions such as "God's essence is *to be*" or "God is simple," even though these assertions look like ordinary predications. Forcing this analogy between assertion and predication opens up space in the available fields of meanings to speak of God



without thereby getting God directly in our grasp. Forcing the analogy does not add God as an object to the scheme of known objects or add an objective description of God to our inventory of known entities. Forcing the analogy provides us with a different way of understanding the relation between what we intend when we use "God" and the objects grasped through ordinary predication schemes. It leads to a very different understanding of the kind of signification that is entailed when we speak of God.

Likewise, the point of Rahner's transcendental analysis is not, as is often thought, to provide a metaphysical proof for the existence of a transcendental object that can be known, spoken of, or described the way we know and speak about other realities. His analysis—like Burrell's, but in a different philosophical idiom—calls attention to the logical difference between talk of God and talk of other realities. Rahner's use of such terms as "Holy Mystery," "nameless whither," "horizon," and "asymptotic goal" (for example, Rahner 1966; 1978) are meant to call attention to this metaphoric shift in signification. Moreover, characteristic of metaphoric signification, affirming that God is transcendental reality effects fundamental and global changes in the available theological and metaphysical fields of meanings. Elsewhere I further trace such conceptual excavations and evaluate their success (see Masson 2001; 2003). In this essay I have recalled the general lines of their projects and underlined their difference from the standard accounts of analogy with a more limited aim: to suggest how a theology of disclosure fundamentally reframes such issues and thus argues for a shift in theological agenda. The discussion between Johnson and Bracken is at cross purposes because it is not attentive enough to the metaphoric dimension of theological meanings. I hazard the hypothesis that such theological confusion is not unusual and is ground that needs to be mined.

## Conclusion

The chief contribution of Gerhart and Russell in *Metaphoric Process* (1984) and *New Maps for Old* (2001) has been to propose an explanatory scheme that illuminates a pivotal mechanism in advances of scientific and religious understanding. Focusing attention on the disciplines' common epistemological foundations relocates cross-disciplinary dialogue at a deeper level. Their theory of metaphoric

process itself is a result of such bidisciplinary work. The second book's further explorations in science and religion indicate the fruitfulness of such exchanges. Their work will make a more significant contribution if the explanatory power of metaphoric process proves itself useful in the clarification of specific and significant theological controversies and if it is actually employed more generally as a conceptual tool in facilitating the dialogues between science and religion and among religions. In that case, metaphoric process would not only describe a way our fields of meanings are sometimes productively and tectonically reconfigured. It would auger something of a tectonic reframing of theology itself and of the dialogue between science and religion.

## References

- Bracken, Joseph A. 1996. "Response to Elizabeth Johnson's 'Does God Play Dice?'" *Theological Studies* 57:720–30.
- . 1999. "The Theology of God of Elizabeth A. Johnson." In *Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, ed. Phyllis Zagano and Terrence W. Tilley, 21–38. New York: Crossroad.
- Burrell, David. 1979. *Aquinas: God and Action*. Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press. Gerhart, Mary, and Allan Melvin Russell. 1984. *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press.
- . 2001. *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion*. New York: Continuum.
- . 2003. "Empathy in Scientific and Religious Understanding." In *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński. Toronto: Hermeneutic Press.
- Hill, William J. 1971. *Knowing the Unknown God*. New York: Philosophical Library. Johnson, Elizabeth A. 1996. "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance." *Theological Studies* 57:3–18.
- . 1999. "Forging Theology: A Conversation with Colleagues." In *Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, ed. Phyllis Zagano and Terrence W. Tilley, 91–123. New York: Crossroad.
- Masson, Robert. 2001. "Analogy and Metaphoric Process." *Theological Studies* 62:571–96.

- . 2003. "The Clash of Christological Symbols: A Case for Metaphoric Realism." In *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, ed. Anne M. Clifford and Anthony J. Godzieba, 62–86. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis.
- McClendon, James William Jr., and James M. Smith. 1994. *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (rev. ed. of *Understanding Religious Convictions*, 1975). Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International.
- Rahner, Karl. 1966. "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology." *Theological Investigations* 4:36–73. Baltimore: Helicon, and London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- . 1978. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. New York: Seabury.
- Sokolowski, Robert. 1982. *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press.
- . 1994. *Eucharist Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press.